Attracting the Right Patients

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Are you trying to attract every patient in town? Or do you just want the right ones?

And who are the “right ones”?

Let’s be honest. The “right” patient understands your treatment plan, wants what you’re offering (in whole or part) and wants it now or soon, has the ability to pay and pays for it (whether they use insurance to help them or they pay out of pocket—doesn’t matter). And it would be nice if they also told their friends about you. That’s the right patient, wouldn’t you agree?

So, where do you find them? The process obviously starts way before they call. It presupposes that you are trying to reach them (some dentists learned the false idea in dental school that telling people how you could benefit them was a crime against humanity). It also presupposes that you are talking to the right people, have the right vehicle and message and of course have the clinical skills to deliver the goods.

It’s a choreographed operation. It starts with a clear identification of your target market. Following that, you have to know what to say to this market that will get them to pick up the phone. After that it’s you and your staff’s demeanor and systems and finally, your clinical skills.

But at first it’s marketing. Marketing is about perceptions—only not your perceptions—it’s the patients’ perceptions, which YOU CREATE, knowingly or unknowingly. Great marketers knowingly create, manage and control those perceptions. The accidental and uneducated marketers also create perceptions—usually the wrong ones.

The perception that most dentists think they need to create and communicate is not what causes a positive response. What you think they want and what you think will get them to call, often doesn’t work.

Why is that? Because you are a dentist, you’re eager to tell the world your experience in creating miracles and changing people’s lives—and the patients are not ready for miracles. They haven’t a clue. It’s a perception problem. You can turn them into extroverted dynamos who can change the world with their smiles, but they just want what their insurance covers.

Identifying the people you want

There’s a huge amount of available data about demographics, psychographics and profiling. Great. Go crazy with it. But what’s the bottom line? You want to give your message to people who can afford what you’re selling. You can send your marketing message to a family of four with an income of $50,000 a year and they won’t call. It doesn’t matter if they’ve responded to surveys telling us pastel colors turn them on, or they make love to their wives/husbands five times a week (yeah, right). Ditch the psychographics data and find the people who have the wherewithal to buy what you’re selling. Target household incomes of $75,000 and up. (Note: NOT house values—it’s household incomes you want—big difference).

How to get started

Look in the Yellow Pages under “Mailing Services.” You’re looking for a mailing list broker. Select one who has been in business for several years. Tell them what kind of people you’re seeking—people who earn $75,000 a year and up. (Note: if you are in rural Indiana then you may want to lower that figure. If you are in Orange County, CA you may want to raise it.) Tell the broker you want a list of people that match these economic demographics in zip codes near your practice. If you have an established practice, use computer software to generate a list of your patients and sort by zip code. Give this list to the broker also. The list the broker provides you with is your universe—the people most likely to need or want to visit the dentist. These are the people, the only people, that you want to target your marketing to. You will live and operate in this changing universe as long as you continue to own that practice.

Choosing Your Vehicle

Now, what do you do with this universe? Send them mail! In 12 years of trying to discover what people respond to, the vehicle of direct mail has been the best return on investment for my clients. That’s not to say that radio, TV, print ads, newsletters, public appearances, Yellow Pages ads, signage, billboards, alliances with cosmetic surgeons and all the rest don’t work, because if done correctly, they will bring patients to your practice. But, for a singular marketing vehicle, direct mail is the clear winner. We always do a direct mail program for our clients no matter what else we do for them. We don’t do coupons. We don’t do free exams. We simply use the right vehicle to send the right message to the right people.

Crafting Your Message

This is the hard part. Now that you know who to talk to, what do you tell them that will cause them to pick up the phone and call?

What I’m going to tell you is something I’ve almost certain you won’t want to hear. I learned long ago that ignoring the marketplace in favor of my own little world vision is a foolish thing to do. The mainstream of dental patients you need to connect with are also those who will provide you with a continuing income. This boils down to FAMILIES. Your marketing message needs to communicate to women (89% of all
dental appointments are made by women) and this gets down to families. You can’t have families, if you don’t have women.

What does this group want to hear and what messages get them to respond? Because of actual real-world tests done over a 12-year period, I suggest you emphasize to your new and existing patients that you are: accessible, friendly, competent and are concerned with their comfort. In addition, you will try not to make them feel guilty when they have neglected their teeth, and will treat them like your family. To live up to these promises, you will have to keep up with the latest technological advances dentistry has to offer through continuing education. High tech is a HUGE selling point and you make it easy to pay. You must also make it easier for them to pay by providing financing options. You don’t have to have the cheapest fees in your area as long as you create and let the patients know they are receiving value for their dollars spent. Fees are not a turn off if you meet or exceed the patient’s expectations.

My agency works with many docs who want to do big cases. Eventually, we get them there, but they uniformly start out working with families. In fact, I know a dentist who does loads of veneers and big cases and grosses over a million a year—solo, but he has a total family image. There are plenty of big cases that will come your way when you focus on families.

It’s all in the perception this doctor creates, manages and controls. The families come in and when they leave they look like they just walked out of LVI or PAC-Live. They also pay full fee. But they wouldn’t have received the life changing benefits of modern dentistry if they hadn’t first picked up the phone.

Everything begins with the selection of the correct target market. Don’t try to educate potential patients with advertising. It doesn’t work. Your goal in advertising isn’t to educate, it’s simply to attract. After they arrive you can do all the educating that is necessary for them to understand their oral health. Your first goal is to get the right people to call. They will call if you get their attention by addressing their problems and concerns about maintaining their oral health.